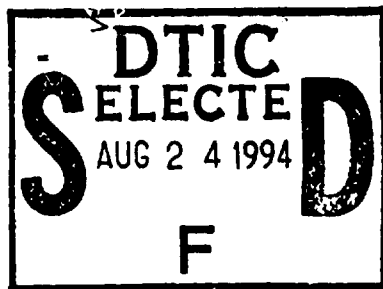


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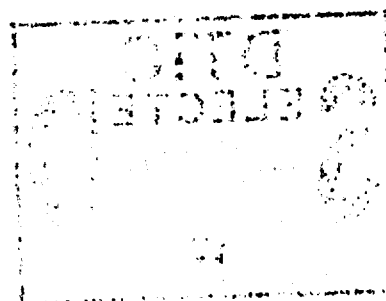
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RAND Research Brief

JUNE 1994

The Effects of War Casualties on U.S. Public Opinion

The experience of the wars in Korea and Vietnam has led many U.S. policymakers and military leaders to believe that the American public cannot tolerate high casualty rates in regional conflicts. Conventional wisdom holds that as casualties mount, public opinion demands a withdrawal of America's commitment. Potential adversaries, such as Saddam Hussein, share this view of the American public's sensitivity to casualties. As the Gulf crisis escalated, the Iraqi leader repeatedly threatened to turn the Kuwaiti desert into a killing field for U.S. soldiers, hoping that fear of casualties would derail American plans for intervention. For him and for U.S. policymakers, the American public's supposed inability to tolerate casualties appears to be an Achilles' heel that can undermine U.S. deterrence strategies and efforts at military intervention.

A recent RAND study¹ examines polling data collected during the Korean, Vietnam, and Gulf wars to assess the influence of public opinion on U.S. military intervention and its implication for American regional deterrence strategies. The study finds that widely accepted conclusions about American public opinion are off the mark. While it is true that high casualty rates have led to increasing dissatisfaction with the conduct of military operations, only a small percentage of Americans polled favored withdrawal from conflict. On the contrary, growing numbers of Americans wanted to see an escalation of the conflicts to bring them to a quick—and victorious—end.

During the wars in Korea and Vietnam, pollsters asked questions to determine public attitudes toward the conflicts. In both cases, there seems to be a clear correlation between mounting casualties and declining support for the war. The one question asked most frequently during both wars—"Given what you now know, do you approve of the decision to go to war?"—is the prism through which public attitudes toward both wars are understood. As the wars continued and casualties grew, the "approval" rating dropped dramatically. However, a look at responses to other questions reveals a far more complex picture of public opinion regarding American military intervention in these conflicts.

Public Reaction During the Korean War

At the beginning of U.S. involvement in Korea, 66 percent of those responding to a Gallup poll approved of America's intervention, and only 12 percent wanted the United States to "pull out, stop fighting" in Korea. By December 1950, after Chinese intervention and a tremendous increase in American casualties, public "approval" dropped to only 39 percent. Yet, only 11 percent of those polled thought that the United States should "withdraw." Over the next 22 months, as casualties rose to 120,000 and as "approval" hovered around 40 percent, various polls showed the number of respondents favoring withdrawal fluctuating between only 12 and 17 percent. Since an average of 10 percent gave no opinion, these figures indicate that roughly 75 percent of the public was against withdrawal.

What course did Americans want their government to follow? While none of the polls asked precisely this question, most gave escalation options that attracted strong support. A 1952 poll, for example, presented four choices: (1) "pull our troops out of Korea"—16 percent, (2) "keep our troops in Korea"—31 percent, (3) "go on the attack against the Communist Chinese"—49 percent, and (4) "no opinion"—4 percent. In a later poll, 34 percent said America should "continue the war" and another 47 percent said it should "attack the Chinese forces with everything we have." Throughout the war, those favoring some form of escalation always greatly outnumbered those favoring withdrawal—from a margin of 2 to 1 at the start of the conflict to a margin of 5 to 1 after July 1951. Clearly, although the public was frustrated with the war, its frustration led not to increasing demands for withdrawal but to a widespread desire for escalation.

Vietnam and the Mood for Escalation

Vietnam, famous for the "antiwar" sentiments it aroused, presents an even sharper picture of the public's desire for escalation. The decline in public approval of the decision to intervene dropped from 62 percent in July 1965 to 32 percent by August 1968 when American casualties had risen to 200,000. However, in that month, only 9 percent of respondents favored the withdrawal option offered by the Roper organization. This same poll offered two escalation options that drew powerful support: "gradually broaden and intensify

¹Benjamin C. Schwarz, *Casualties, Public Opinion, and U.S. Military Intervention: Implications for U.S. Regional Deterrence Strategies*, RAND, MR-431-A/AF, 1994.

our military effort"—24 percent, or "start an all-out effort to win the war quickly, even at the risk of China or Russia entering the war"—30 percent.

Other polls tell the same story: Public opinion during the Vietnam conflict became increasingly "antiwar," but not in the sense that term is generally understood. While Americans grew more and more disenchanted with the way the war was conducted, a growing number of them wanted the United States to wage a kind of war that decisionmakers considered too bloody and too dangerous.

Any Means Necessary in the Gulf

While the Gulf war is now regarded as America's most "popular" war since World War II, it is easy to forget the public's ambivalence during the months preceding intervention. A poll conducted six weeks before the Senate granted the president authority to use force against Iraq showed that only 37 percent of Americans approved of intervention while 51 percent disapproved. Public debate revolved around an agonizing question: Is ejecting Iraq from Kuwait worth the lives of a large number of U.S. soldiers? Yet, although Americans believed the Gulf war would be a very bloody affair, the public quickly rallied around the flag once the United States committed itself to military action. On the eve of the air offensive against Iraq, 73 percent favored the action and only 15 percent were opposed. In early February, during the air campaign, 83 percent responding to a Gallup poll "approved" of U.S. intervention, even though more than 80 percent believed that "the situation will develop into a bloody ground war with high numbers of casualties on both sides" and that "Iraq will use chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons."

Significantly, despite such fears, most Americans were not satisfied with merely continuing the war—they wanted military action to be expanded. After Saddam's forces were ejected from Kuwait, 67 percent of respondents did not wish the United States to stop the fighting but wanted to press on until Saddam was removed from power. Moreover, the public increasingly supported the use of any means necessary to defeat Iraq. A Gallup poll taken early in January 1991—when military action against Iraq was no more than a vague possibility—showed that only 24 percent of respondents favored the use of nuclear weapons against Iraq if it might save lives of U.S. soldiers. A month later, just before ground operations against Iraq began, 48 percent approved of a nuclear attack. It is worth noting that the poll did not ask whether Americans approved of a nuclear attack in response to Iraqi use of weapons of mass destruction. A large portion of the public was expressing support for a nuclear *first strike* against Iraq, a position at variance with both U.S. policy and international law.

A Resolute Public

The pattern that emerges from the polling information collected during the three wars is that the American public is likely to be skeptical about U.S. military intervention, largely because of anxiety regarding American casualties, *before* a commitment is made. Once committed, regardless of its opinions concerning the initial decision to intervene and regardless of costs incurred or costs feared, the public shows little inclination to quit an intervention and instead resolutely supports an escalation of the conflict along with any measures it deems necessary for a decisive victory.

Implications

The study concludes that a proper understanding of public opinion about U.S. military intervention can enhance U.S. regional deterrence strategies. This point is best illustrated by Saddam Hussein's threats to cause terrible U.S. casualties in the desert. Before the war, this threat influenced public debate and might have been decisive if political leaders had not been able to convince the public that vital American interests were at stake in the Gulf. Later, once military action was under way, public opinion turned toward escalation. Had American casualties been high, the U.S. public would likely have intensified its demands to escalate both the means and the ends of the conflict. Under such circumstances, American political leadership would have been under tremendous pressure not to cease hostilities until the Iraqi regime was destroyed—which was clearly the public's preference even without high U.S. casualties.

Regional deterrence strategies could therefore be aided if the following were communicated to potential adversaries: In past U.S. regional interventions, public sentiments have led to cries for escalation and decisive victory. There is no doubt that such cries will be repeated in the future, particularly if Americans are confronted with significant U.S. casualties. While U.S. political and military leaders may see advantages in keeping the ends and means of a conflict limited—especially in a post-Cold War world that no longer threatens to turn regional conflicts into superpower confrontations—public feeling takes on a momentum of its own and can easily become hotheaded, unpredictable, and (from the enemy's point of view) ruthless. In short, should a regional adversary choose to take actions that will lead to American military intervention, U.S. public sentiment could push decisionmakers to escalate quickly and unpredictably beyond the limitations they might wish to place on the conflict. In such a situation, hostile regimes might find themselves at the mercy of an impatient and ruthless U.S. public.

RAND research briefs summarize research that has been more fully documented elsewhere. This research brief describes work conducted jointly in Project AIR FORCE and the Arroyo Center and documented in Casualties, Public Opinion, and U.S. Military Intervention: Implications for U.S. Regional Deterrence Strategies by Benjamin C. Schwarz, RAND, MR-431-AIAF, 1994. To order a copy of the report, please contact RAND Distribution Services: Telephone: (310) 451-7002; FAX: (310) 451-6915; Internet: order@rand.org. RAND is a nonprofit institution that seeks to improve public policy through research and analysis. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of its research sponsors.

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